



Cool Season Annuals Add a Needed Shot of Color

Why wait until Mother's Day to add color to beds, borders and container gardens? Cool-season annuals announce the beginning of the gardening season. They thrive in cool weather; most can tolerate light frosts; all will brighten your mood.

Pansies

Gardeners often think of pansies first when considering cool season color. Their lightly scented flowers are available in just about any color or combination of colors. Extend their bloom time by deadheading spent flowers. Pansies cease blooming when the heat of summer sets in.

Pansies rarely reach more than 8 inches tall. If they're planted in the ground, space them about 6 inches apart. In containers, tuck them in tight. Pansies perform in part shade to full sun. They are gorgeous in mass plantings and colorful additions to containers.

My favorites are from the Frizzle Sizzle series. Ruffled edges add playfulness to their already cheerful faces.

Violas



Violas may have smaller flowers than their cousin, the pansy, but they make up for their smaller size with more blooms. Offering solid-colored varieties and others with cheerful faces, they are sweet as can be in container gardens.

Plant them in sun to part shade and they will bloom profusely until they succumb to the heat of summer. You can cut them back to prepare them for a repeat show in fall or just pull them and replace them with summer flowers.

Some new types to try in 2014 are from the Hip Hop series, and they can only be found at independent garden centers. Hip Hop Cranbunny and Hip Hop Honeybunny are both cuties that should find their way onto your cart as you are choosing plants this spring.

Alyssum

Alyssum blooms in a profusion of sweetly scented white, pink, or lavender flowers. White-flowering alyssum is the most fragrant. You won't be able to resist plunging your nose into its flowers to gather its honey sweet scent.

Plant it in a carpet of color near your front door or in containers where it can trail over an edge. Find a spot for alyssum in sun to light shade where they'll scoff at late spring frosts and bloom like crazy.

Newer varieties don't fade in heat and continue to bloom throughout the summer. Look for the Clear Crystal series. If they start to look a little leggy or summer worn, cut them back. In a couple weeks, they will be blooming again.



Stock

Stock grows from 12 to 30 inches tall depending on the variety. Yellow, pink, rose, lavender, purple, red or white flowers encircle strong stems. Flowers have a sweet, clove-like fragrance – lightly scented during the day; strongly scented at night.

Plant them in the garden as soon as soil can be worked in a spot in full sun about a foot apart, or use them as vertical accents in containers.

Snapdragons

What would a spring garden be without snaps? These standouts can be dwarf plants as short as 6 inches and relative giants stretching up to 4 feet tall. You can find a variety in just above every color except blue. Flowers bloom from the bottom up keeping stems in color longer. Removing spent flowers will keep snapdragons blooming longer.

Plant snapdragons in full sun to part shade. They are at their best in cool weather, but some varieties are more heat tolerant and bloom repeatedly throughout the summer. Mulch snaps planted in the garden to keep the soil cooler.

Dianthus

Commonly called pinks or Sweet William, these cool-season sun lovers boast flowers that look like pint-sized versions of their cousin, the carnation. Bright, fragrant, fringed blooms can be found in red, salmon, pink, rose and white.

Plants grow 10 to 20 inches tall depending on variety. They are beautiful massed together in the front of the garden or give needed height to spring container gardens. Many varieties, if deadheaded, will continue blooming through the summer.

Ranunculus

I fall in love with buttercups all over again every spring. Although they quickly surrender to warmer temperatures, there are no flowers more beautiful while the weather stays cool. Large, gorgeous flowers layered with delicate petals rise above celery-like foliage in shades of yellow, pink, red, orange and white. And flowers last a long time!

Plant Ranunculus in full sun and in very well drained soil. They will not tolerate wet soils. If you've shied away from buttercups in the past, try some this spring and have an affair to remember.



Don't wait until Mother's Day to brighten your landscape with color. After the winter we've just experienced, welcome spring with a vengeance. Let your gardens and containers blush with the springtime beauty and color of cool-season annuals.



Diana Stoll is a horticulturist and the garden center manager at The Planter's Palette, 28W571 Roosevelt Rd., Winfield, IL 60190. Call 630-293-1040 or visit their website at www.planterpalette.com.